ANDROID™ NETRUNNER™ THE CARD GAME

Whispers in Nalubaale

Atop the rippling crystal of Lake Victoria sits the skeleton of a second beanstalk. Trade and tourism thrive within the fertile crescent as the Sub-Saharan League, a unity of nations in the midst of an economic and cultural renaissance, works tirelessly to construct the new link between the world of dirt and the limitless expanse. Though determination and focus breed peace within the region, those on the edge wish to disrupt the architecture for personal profit and political vendetta.

Late-Night Liberation

"Freedom," said Freedom Khumalo, taking a swig of Castle Synthi-Sights, "Freedom is what we need right now." Every word mattered. He needed to both convince and impress his date. *No pressure.*

The sun had finally dropped beneath the towering, treescaped urban skyline of Kampala megapolis.

Overhead, the hanging rainbow tendrils on the outside of the Baobab Centre blazed into multicolored life, and Centenary Park rapidly filled up with neon- and luminescent-suited film buffs, buzzing in expectant anticipation of their immersive threedee experience.

Freedom was already well on his way to being immersed, his peripheral vision popping with exploding fireworks, side effects from his drink. *Damn, usually not this anxious. Maybe the drink's a mistake, but a lot's riding on this.*

Despite the fireworks flowering his vision, Freedom focused on Deborah Masane—a bright young grad in NewsMediaTalk from Kampala Uni—her bemused smile offset by her green bloused-trouser smartsuit. Sharp clothes, as befit the former personal assistant of Victoria Jenkins, before Jenkins moved up to head NBN.

So, yes, *the* Victoria Jenkins.

Now the mouth of Azmari EdTech, Deborah was the chief spokesperson for all regional media—and Freedom Khumalo's last resort. She swung her long left arm expansively around the park. "Freedom is all around you," she answered, "and soon the second Beanstalk will liberate our skies, too."

Customers farther along the bar counter were sipping and chatting with obvious enjoyment of the balmy evening. Freedom laughed, as a kaleidoscopic Catherine wheel went off in his right eye. *Not what I wanted to hear. The governments and corporations see only money, so the media is our only key to changing public opinion.*

Slowly, Freedom poured the rest of his Castle drink into the African violets planted neatly behind him. He would need all his wits and vision to both enjoy the night and persuade this one that her freedom was an illusion and that the planned elevator was the final lock and key on Kampala.

"The greed of politicians and corporations around this elevator will ruin us all with their corruption, Deborah. Surely you can see that." *Opening gambit gentle; be quietly persuasive.*

"That's overly pessimistic, surely, Freedom." She looked skeptical as Freedom took her arm gently, steering her through the dilating door and into the Baobab Centre. The sounds and smells swirled overwhelmingly around them, given they had not isolated stimuli to a chosen threedee with their PADs.

"Here, we are spoiled for choice," Freedom shouted above the noise. "How free are we, then, if we have too much to choose from? The elevator will only add more stuff, more chaos, less freedom."

"We're still free to get the hell out of here," she shouted back. "Let's go back to the bar."

Deborah plugged her ears with her fingers as they left the centre and wound their way back to the bar, where the chatter and noise was significantly less overwhelming. Freedom muscled a space for her at the end of the counter.

"What's your poison, Deborah?" he asked her. *Perhaps her views would relax more if she were lubricated?*

"Fever tree juice," she said. He didn't blame her for wanting to keep her wits about her—it was their first meeting, after all. He was happy to have a shot of Pantsula Whisky, however, to steel him for the sparring still to come.

"So you see," he said, handing her the fever tree juice. "When there's too much stuff available, like the threedee sensory overload inside the centre, we are robbed of freedom. Open that damn space elevator, and we'll be drowned in stuff that will just suffocate and destroy us."

Deborah took a swig of her juice before replying, as if she needed a moment to gather her thoughts. "More goods, more choice, more freedom," she said, simply.

Then she belched. And laughed, a belly laughter that belied her genteel appearance.

Freedom smiled. *Less rigid than she seems. Good.* "Ah," he said. "But you're only as free as your relative access to all of this—we don't all carry the same freedom, do we?"

Deborah moved her gaze from the lights flickering above them to his face, searching his eyes. Freedom found it hard to keep his gaze steady.

Young, but sharp; she reads me. Don't let your desperate urgency show, Khumalo. Few truly understand how crucial this issue is for all of us.

"No, we don't have the same freedom," Deborah said, slowly but with certitude, "but the more we have, the more there is to share."

Of course, Deborah Masane spoke both for herself and for Azmari EdTech. *She speaks with the grounded finality of a baobab tree, whose position will not be shifted.*

"Anyway, what do you fancy taking part in?" Deborah glanced down at her PAD to see the list of threedees nearby. "The Moketsi movie looks pretty."

Freedom nodded his assent. Deborah was a puzzling enigma: a woman with a social conscience, it seemed, but a corporate clone as well, in all likelihood.

He offered her his arm as they left the counter and headed back to the entrance to the centre.

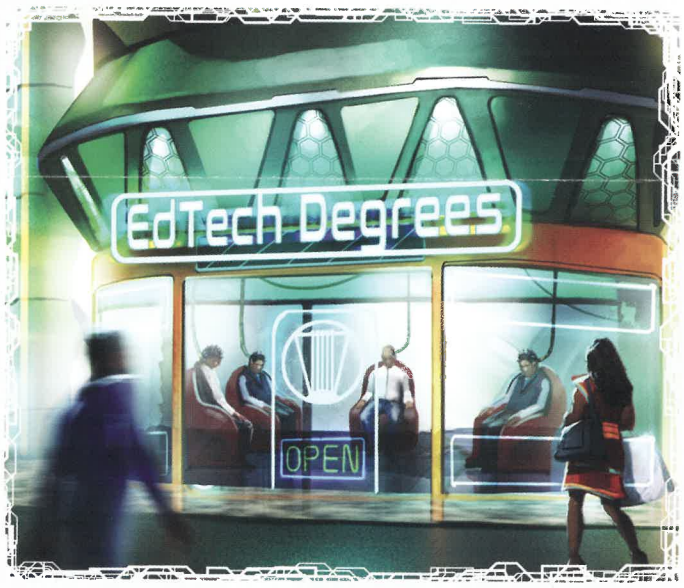
Freedom hesitated, ready to key in the access codes Deborah had already punched for herself. She would surely make a good companion afterward, perhaps to discuss their shared experiences of the movie, maybe even over some harder liquor at his home pad?

"You're a passionate man, Freedom, if a trifle misguided." Deborah's comment was offhand. She was already focusing on the bigger picture forming around her.

Misguided? So I have neither convinced nor impressed her. Facing away from him, Deborah opened her arms to invisible refugees. It was as if Freedom no longer existed. *This is* not *freedom!*

He slipped away from Deborah Masane, disappearing into the jostling crowd.

Misguided? I am a Khumalo. My ancestor, Mzilikazi, was the only one to ever beat the mighty Shaka Zulu in battle. Now it really is the time for a new war. An underground war. Time for anarchy. Time for freedom.



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